

Hunt Brothers Claim 'Oppression' by U.S. In Denying Charges of Wiretap Coverup

By a WALL STREET JOURNAL Staff Reporter

DALLAS—Two sons of the late Texas oil billionaire H. L. Hunt said they are innocent of charges that they tried to cover up an alleged wiretap operation in the Hunt oil complex.

In a statement, Nelson Bunker Hunt and William Herbert Hunt charged instead that the government is engaged in "oppression of us because of our conservative views."

That and other charges made by the Hunts brought a sharp denial from U.S. Attorney Frank McCown in Fort Worth.

"That's ridiculous," Mr. McCown said of the charge of political persecution. "That derides the entire grand jury process and some 23 grand jurors. It is their indictment, not ours."

For instance, the brothers claimed that the government has failed to prosecute a major participant in an alleged embezzlement scheme involving losses of over \$50 million from Hunt Oil Co. The brothers further contended that this scheme was uncovered after they refused a Central Intelligence Agency request to place CIA agents in the Hunt International Petroleum Co.

Late Monday, a federal grand jury here returned indictments against the two brothers and five other persons that centered on a conspiracy to cover up an alleged 1970 wiretapping operation of certain employees of Hunt Oil Co. and other Hunt companies. The charges included offering witnesses money to go to prison and refusing to testify about the alleged wiretapping operations.

Currently, the two Hunts are scheduled to go on trial this fall in a Lubbock, Texas, federal court on earlier charges that they once hired private detectives to illegally wiretap the homes of several Hunt Oil Co. employees. Several of these detectives have been convicted and given prison sentences or fines.

Hunts' Statement

In their statement, the Hunts said that upon learning of the grand jury investigation, they offered to send their attorney before the grand jury to testify.

"The Department of Justice refused to allow this," the brothers said. "We have co-

operated to the fullest and voluntarily given these government investigators thousands of documents," their statement continued. "They have, however, refused our offer to face the grand jury man to man."

Mr. McCown took issue with the Hunts' interpretation of the grand jury investigation, contending, among other things, that the lawyer hadn't any direct knowledge of the case and that under grand jury rules he couldn't testify.

Others named in the indictments were Texas attorneys Percy Foreman, Ralph Shank, Charles Tessmer and B. H. Timmins Jr., and Edward J. Hudson, retired president of Hudson Engineering Corp., Houston.

Mr. Shank said in response to the charges that "In more than 40 years of law practice I have neither attempted to nor engaged in any obstruction of justice." He said "I am not guilty of any of the charges alleged in the grand jury indictment. I am confident I will be exonerated by the court and jury in a fair public trial."

Frank Wright, attorney for Mr. Tessmer, said the indictments "come as no surprise and we feel that there are several people caught in the political intrigue between the government and the Hunts and that these indictments are a direct result of that." He added that Mr. Tessmer hasn't "committed any criminal offense."

Mr. Timmins declined comment on the charges. Messrs. Foreman and Hudson couldn't immediately be reached for a response. However, Mr. Foreman is expected to hold a press conference in Dallas today.

Charges Evidence Turned Over to U.S.

The Hunt brothers declined to comment beyond their statement. Elaborating on the alleged embezzlement scheme, their document charged that an investigation showed some Hunt employees involved in the scheme "were secret government agents." Evidence of this was given to the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Internal Revenue Service, they said, but "the government refused to investigate the matter" until, at the insistence of Hunt lawyers, "the Justice Department started an investigation some four years later."

The Hunts said the Justice Department

and that two mail fraud convictions of ex-Hunt employees resulted.

"Despite this," the Hunt statement continued, "The FBI and the Department of Justice have failed to prosecute one of the main embezzlers and tried to protect their own agents as part of the coverup."

In their statement, the Hunts didn't directly tie the alleged unsuccessful CIA attempt to infiltrate agents into their overseas operations to the federal charges. However, they said that they would "continue to refuse to cooperate with illegal operations of the Central Intelligence Agency despite this misuse of the legal system against us."

In response to these charges, U.S. Attorney McCown acknowledged that a Hunt employee was an FBI agent some 20 years ago, but said that the fact was known by the Hunts. To his knowledge, he added, no government agents work for Hunt Oil.

Mr. McCown further contended that Postal authorities, "the proper investigatory agents," investigated the Hunt embezzlement and that the Justice Department prosecuted after the Hunts produced a file on the matter 18 months ago.

Two men were convicted, but the statute of limitations prevented indictment of a third man, he said.

In a stipulation filed in the Lubbock wiretap case, the government admitted that the CIA contacted the Hunts in the mid-1960s, Mr. McCown said. However, the official added that he doesn't recall the nature of the contact.